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ABSTRACT

There is a need for leadership in the development of effective middle level schools in the United States. Despite the increasing numbers of schools that call themselves middle schools, there has not been much change in the educational program for pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8. Leaders in middle grades education need to examine current data about the physical, intellectual, and personality development of the early adolescent and to identify the implications of this data for the middle school curriculum, school organization, the role of the teacher in the middle school, and other related areas. A curriculum model that is responsive to the needs of the early adolescent learner should be used in developing middle school curricula. While research indicates no single best way to organize the middle school for instruction, teaching teams offer an excellent way to be flexible in providing various instructional situations that meet students' needs. It should be recognized that all possible components of a middle school program cannot be implemented in the first year of a program; a limited number of goals should be determined for the first year. Staff development is essential in starting the program and then expanding the middle school to its fullest potential. (Nine characteristics of an effective middle school are listed in the text of the address.) (Author/RH)

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LEADERSHIP FOR MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION

Elliot Y. Merenbloom & Dr. Gordon F. Vars

As the number of middle schools increases from nearly 5,000 in 1980 to some 10,000 by the end of the decade, the need for leadership will increase also. This leadership must come from regional, state, and local levels; thus a sharing of ideas will enable concerned educators to develop the expertise needed. The specific purpose of this Assembly is to present ideas and specific practices that will facilitate leadership in four areas of middle grades education. The four areas are: (1) Understanding the Nature and Needs of Early Adolescent Students; (2) Curriculum Development, Implementation, and Evaluation; (3) Organizing Middle Schools for Effective Instruction; and (4) Expanding the Middle School Program to Meet Future Needs.

Why Is There A Need for Leadership for Middle Grades Education?

The middle school movement started in the early 1960's. By 1968, there were 1,100 middle schools in the United States. That number doubled by 1970 and nearly doubled again by 1974. In 1979, there were more than 5,000 middle schools in this nation. This number is expected to grow to 10,000 by the end of the decade.

Middle schools have developed for many reasons, not all of them purely educational. Middle schools have been developed because of desegregation/integration plans ordered by the courts, increasing enrollment, decreasing enrollment, and those who wanted to jump on the bandwagon of something new in education. Some, and unfortunately very few, middle schools have been created for a very valid reason - to improve the instructional program for the early adolescent student.

In 1977, Dr. Kenneth Brooks wanted to look at the qualitative picture of the middle school movement. His study identified seven major conclusions:

(1) Preponderence of teachers in middle schools had secondary certification
(2) 90% of the schools were graded
(3) Departmentalized teaching is the rule
(4) Team teaching was used in 15-20% of the schools
(5) Pupils were grouped in traditional sized classes
(6) Curriculum is similar to junior high school
(7) Teachers were resistant to change

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These findings were similar to the findings of the Alexander study conducted 10 years earlier.

Our concern is that despite the increasing number of schools that call themselves middle schools, there really has not been much change in the educational program for pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8. We have many nominal middle schools and few real middle schools. If this premise is true, it is rather unfortunate because many of the factors grouped together and known as the middle school concept represent better ways to facilitate learning for pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8. Also, this infers that the middle school does not possess an identity and distinctiveness of its own. In theory and in the real middle schools, there is such an identity and distinctiveness.

An effective middle level school . . .

(1) Features a program that responds to the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral needs of the early adolescent learner
(2) Possesses a definite curriculum plan that includes factual information or organized knowledge, skills, and personal development activities that are correlated with each other on a formal basis
(3) Builds on the successes of elementary education and in turn prepares pupils for a successful experience in the senior high school
(4) Employs teachers who can focus on the learning needs of pupils by using a variety of teaching techniques that actually involve pupils in the learning process
(5) Organizes teachers into interdisciplinary and/or disciplinary teaching teams using block-of-time and modular scheduling techniques to better implement the instructional program
(6) Recognizes the importance of affective education by providing for a home-base or teacher/advisor program, stressing the importance of self-concept in the curricular as well as the extra-curricular program and working as a total staff to provide a positive climate for learning
(7) Promotes flexibility in the implementation of the daily, weekly, and monthly schedule of classes and activities as to best meet the unique and varying needs of the students
(8) Emphasizes the guidance and counseling function of each member of the staff in the daily implementation of the curricular and extra-curricular program
(9) Evaluates the program on a regular basis and makes those changes that enhance the learning process

The need for leadership in middle grades education means teaching other

educational leaders what these characteristics of an effective middle level school are and how to be a catalyst to the development of effective middle level schools. A number of national educational organizations are trying to do this, but obviously more work needs to be done. Also, in an era of declining enrollment and higher costs of government services, leaders in education must convince the tax-paying public why they should support the middle school concept and its related cost factors.

Understanding the Nature and Needs of Early Adolescent Students

The reason for middle schools is that the junior high school as we know it did not meet the unique needs of the early adolescent learner. Thus, the program of the middle school should respond to the needs of the students. Within the past 20 to 30 years, new information about the early adolescent learner has emerged. Leaders in middle grades education should study this literature and be able to plan and implement programs that build on this information. The literature covers three major areas of development: physical, intellectual, and personality.

A major theme in the data about the physical development of the early adolescent is that puberty is achieved earlier by today's youth than by youth in previous generations. Also, there is a timetable for growth for boys and girls, but these timetables are not the same. Individual differences are great among students in a middle school classroom.

The recent discoveries of Dr. Herman Epstein in the area of brain growth periodization not only have substantiated Piaget's thinking from a biological point of view but also have provided further insight into the early adolescent's intellectual processes. Dr. Epstein found that the human brain experienced great growth spurts at certain times and virtually no growth at other times. Dr. Conrad Toepfer has helped us to derive the educational implications of this research. Leaders in middle grades education must be able to accommodate the wide range of learning abilities and styles during the middle school years.

Personality development includes both social and emotional development. As the physical changes occur, the student becomes more sensitive about changes that have or

have not taken place. Major topics in this area of adolescent growth and development are: self-concept, sex role identification, peer group influence, and other turbulences that are a part of this transitional period.

Leaders in middle grades education must be able to examine this data and then identify the implications of this data for:

(1) Middle School Curriculum
(2) Organization of the Middle School
(3) Role of the Classroom Teacher in the Middle School
(4) Nature of the Middle School Learning Environment
(5) A Middle School Guidance and Counseling Program
(6) The Teacher/Advisor Program
(7) The Reading Program in the Middle School

This process must include adult perceptions of the needs as well as student perceptions of needs. Within this process, students should complete surveys and be interviewed for more in-depth information. Students can be involved in curriculum committees, student-teacher planning, and other evaluative procedures.

Curriculum Development, Implementation, and Evaluation

Dr. William Alexander offers a model for middle school curriculum that builds on our knowledge of the early adolescent learner. The model includes three factors - organized knowledge, skills, and personal development.

Organized knowledge refers to the content or subject matter which is generally thought to be the heart of all of the subjects in the school's curriculum. Skills include reading, writing, computing, and listening; the middle school needs a master plan to teach skills sequentially. Personal development refers to information needed by the early adolescent to better understand growth and development occuring.

These are two applications of this model. First, the curriculum for each content area should include organized knowledge, skills, and personal development. The second application involves the functioning of an interdisciplinary team which should make every effort to correlate or integrate organized knowledge, skills, and personal development in the total instructional program designed by members of the team as they work to meet the learning needs of the pupils on the team.

Leaders in middle grades education must examine the process of curriculum development to see that the programs developed do, in fact, meet the learning needs of the pupils. Curriculum must be prepared for the interdisciplinary team as well as the chronological or grade level needs of the various content areas. Each school should have a Curriculum Coordination Committee. Curriculum evaluation should be based on surveys of students, teachers, and parents as well as follow-up studies and appropriate standardized instruments.

Organizing Middle Schools for Effective Instruction

There must be a plan to present the instructional program to pupils. This plan must reflect what we know about the learning needs of the early adolescent. A key word is flexibility, and teaching teams offer an excellent way to be flexible. There is no research to determine the best way to organize for instruction; therefore, leaders in middle grades education need to continue to evaluate the various options.

Six plans are suggested. They are: (1) instruction in individual classrooms, (2) interdisciplinary teams, (3) disciplinary or single subject teams, (4) combination subject teams, (5) the house plan, and (6) ungraded. These plans are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the school plan can be a combination of 2 or 3 of the options at various grade levels. To some extent, these combinations or patterns depend on the existing curriculum guides in a school district as well as the assessed needs of the students.

The faculty should be involved in building the master schedule for a middle school. Team leaders and department heads should participate in creating the blocks-of-time for the various teaching teams. Then, the various teaching teams will not only support the decisions involved in the schedule but will also work to make the best use of the schedule once the school year starts. For example, teams of teachers can constantly re-group students in large and small group situations build rotating schedules, and implement reading and/or teacher/advisor programs. The greater the flexibility used by the team of teachers the more likely the program will be responsive to the varied, everchanging needs of the pupils on the team.

Expanding the Middle School Program to Meet Future Needs

In converting a junior high school to a middle school or opening a new middle school, there needs to be a reasonable starting point. One cannot expect every aspect or component of a middle school program to go into effect at the same time or within one year. Rather, a limited number of goals should be determined for the first year. Teachers can do only so much in any one year. Then, in future years, additional goals can be written to implement additional facets.

Some goals or aspects of the program that can be implemented either initially or at a later date are:

(1) Forming teaching teams
(2) Orienting pupils to the middle school
(3) Helping teachers function as a team
(4) Implementing a model for teaching reading
(5) Implementing a specific phase of a reading program such as vocabulary development or comprehension skills
(6) Implementing a home base or teacher/advisor program
(7) Correlating content in various subjects
(8) Improving communication with parents
(9) Mainstreaming handicapped pupils
(10) Assessing team effectiveness

Staff development is essential in starting and then expanding the middle school to reach its fullest potential in meeting the learning needs of the early adolescent learner. Leaders in middle grades education need to examine the process by which the program is expanded as well as the details of the new facets being added. Inservice courses are frequently the means to help a group of highly interested teachers to successfuly expand a middle school program to meet an additional need. Other successful staff development activities include: guest speakers, visiting other schools, team planning meetings, department meetings, and attending conferences and seminars.

As a middle school program expands and evolves, it is necessary to stop and evaluate the extent to which the goals are being achieved. A formal evaluation instrument may or may not be needed. A listing of accomplishments may be sufficient. Future goals can be determined based on an assessment of the situation.

Summary

There is clearly a need for leadership in the development of effective middle level schools in this nation. Despite the increasing numbers of schools that call themselves middle schools, there really has not been much change in the educational program for pupils in grades 6, 7, and 8.

Nine characteristics of an effective middle level school were presented. Leaders in middle grades education need to be the catalyst for creating effective middle level schools. This can be accomplished by examining four specific areas:

(1) Understanding the Nature and Needs of Early Adolescent Students:

Leaders in middle grades education need to examine current data about the physical, intellectual, and personality development of the early adolescent and identify the implications of this data for middle school curriculum, school organization, the role of the teacher in the middle school, and other areas.

(2) Curriculum Development, Implementation, and Evaluation:

Dr. Alexander suggests a model for curriculum that builds on the needs of the early adolescent learner. This model should be used in developing curriculum. As curriculum is developed, implemented, and evaluated, the focus must be on the extent to which the curriculum is responsive to the needs of the students.

(3) Organizing Middle Schools for Effective Instruction:

Flexibility is the key word in organizing middle schools for effective instruction. This flexibility can be achieved by creating patterns or combinations of types of teaching teams. The more flexibility used by the team of teachers the more responsive the teachers will be in meeting the learning needs of the students.

(4) Expanding the Middle School Program to Meet Future Needs:

Every possible component of a middle school program cannot be in place in the first year of a program. After a reasonable beginning, additional parts of the program can be put in place using a reasonable approach. Staff development is a key to the successful development and expansion of the program to eventually meet the learning needs of the pupils.

The middle school concept represents an excellent plan for teaching the early adolescent student. In order for this concept to be achieved, leaders in middle grades education will have to study the plan and develop strategies for implementing the program.